

Why Should My Child Learn a Language?

As a Head of School I was occasionally approached by parents who questioned the need to learn a second language. Some felt that the Early Years focus should be on literacy and numeracy and that LOTE was an unnecessary addition to a 'crowded curriculum'. Others believed that a child should be proficient in their first language before another language is introduced. A few thought that bilingualism was of little value to Australian children. My attempts to convince parents of the benefits of second language learning were met with mixed success. I hope that this overview of some of the reasons why second language learning enriches us both personally and nationally will assist you to champion the cause in your schools.

The call for a bilingual Australia is becoming louder. Business and parent groups, universities and governments attest to the importance of developing an education system that equips today's students with competencies that will prepare them for the 21st century.

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VCAA 2005) are predicated on the belief that today's education needs to reflect the economic and social changes associated with the development of our global, knowledge-based world - and their implications for schools. The introduction to the LOTE Discipline-based learning Strand reiterates the VELS premise that language learning contributes to the development of interculturally aware citizens which is of increasing importance at a time of rapid and deep globalisation (VCAA 2005).

The stage is set for a seismic shift in the global economies of the world. The National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools identifies the emergence of Asia as one of history's greatest catalysts for worldwide change. As our closet neighbours and major trading partners, the burgeoning economies of India and China are having global repercussions and will impact substantially on Australia. Young Australians need to be given the skill set required to take their place in the unfolding global economy and it will be language and intercultural knowledge that will be the keys to unlocking opportunities to live and work on the world stage.

The former Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Cosgrove, AC, MC, in his 2002 address to the Australian Primary Principals' Association Professional Development Council (APAPDC) stated,

'Language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order. Along with computer literacy they will provide the keys to participation in the global economy.'

The social and economic benefits of language learning are echoed in the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) latest release. As the peak council of Australian business associations, the Chamber's role is to represent the interests of business at a national level as well as internationally. Its recent report, *Skills for a Nation: A Blueprint for Improving Education and Training 2007-2017*, identifies that to effectively participate in a globalised world there should be the compulsory learning of a foreign language from seven years of age or earlier (ACCI 2007).

The blueprint reiterates the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Adelaide Declaration that the national goals for schooling provide a basis for investment in schooling to enable all young people to engage effectively with an increasingly complex world. This world will be characterised by advances in information and communication technologies, population diversity arising from international mobility and migration, and complex environmental and social challenges (DEST 2002).

Education creates productivity. It builds human capital and enhances our standard of living. The ability of Australians to grow economic prosperity demands an education system that develops a set of key competencies necessary for effective engagement with developing markets. These key skills should include a second language and intercultural understanding.

With less than 14 per cent of Australian students studying a language other than English in the final year of school, academics warn that a national trend towards monolingualism poses a threat to our trade and security. Professor Michael Clyne, a long term advocate for bilingualism sees Australia as perfectly placed to provide a linguistic and cultural bridge between continents. "We have so much language potential, and we should be taking advantage of it. We could be leaders in cross-cultural communication, and an important link between Europe and Asia (Clyne 2006)." Carillo Ganter, patron of the Asialink Centre, reiterates Michael Clyne's sentiments in his Commencement Dinner speech at Melbourne

University in 2006. Quoting The Australian newspaper's foreign editor Greg Sheridan, Ganter identifies the need for an education system that enables Australians to seek active engagement and

understanding of all of our spheres of influence. He notes that our history is predominantly European; our security alliance centres on the US; our trade is dominated by North Asia; and our security environment by South and South East Asia. These unique circumstances dictate that we need deep “cultural understanding” of all four regions (Ganter 2006).

The Group of Eight (Go8) is a group of leading Australian universities who work to ensure a consistent and sustainable policy environment which maximizes the wide-ranging economic, social and cultural benefits to the Australian community of higher education (Go8). The Go8 held a national languages summit *Languages in Crisis* at the National Press Club, Canberra on June 7, 2007. The summit was a forum for discussion of strategies to enhance Australia’s language capacity. Featuring Major Michael Stone, an Australian soldier who has learned to speak Timorese and is achieving great things through his role as a negotiator, interpreter and community liaison officer. The summit’s suggestion that second language learning should be mandatory is another indicator of the growing realisation that language and intercultural understanding must play a central role in the education of our young people.

One of the benefits of second language learning is the effect it has on brain function. Modern optical imaging technology captures brain activity and research has shown that the bilingual brain behaves differently to that of the single language learner. Studies show that bilingual children demonstrate greater creativity, cognitive development and divergent thinking than monolingual children.

The work of researcher Andrea Mechelli of London's Wellcome Department of Imaging Neuroscience discovered that the brain of bilingual people develops more densely which gives it an advantage in various abilities and skills. Mechelli’s research explains the nature of the two types of tissue visible to the naked eye, termed grey and white matter. Bilingual speakers had denser grey matter (or volume and intellect), especially in areas of language, memory, and attention compared with monolingual participants (Hitti 2004). Mechelli’s work showed that this was especially evident in participants who had begun their second language learning at or before age five. This is due to the fecundity of neural networks and greater plasticity of the young child’s brain. The University of Cologne’s, Dr Claudia Riehl purports that a second language should be acquired as early as possible and that language learning in the classroom can be improved through programmes which consider that languages are connected (Riehl 2006).

Learning a second language assists proficiency in first language learning. The investigation of structures and the application of strategies for accessing language establish a set of connected and complementary understandings which leads to an enhanced mastery of both languages. Several studies show that people who are competent in more than one language outscore those who are speakers of only one language on tests of verbal and non verbal intelligence. (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986). Australian research (Clyne et al. 1995:8) showed that exposure to

as little as one hour per week of a second language in the earliest years of primary school advances the age of reading readiness in English.

Ellen Bialystock of York University, Canada, found that pre-school children who are bi-lingual are quicker to understand the symbolic function of letters and score twice as high as monolingual children in recognition tests of written characters (Bialystock 1997). Studies also show that learning another language enhances the academic skills of students by increasing their abilities in reading, writing and mathematics (NCSSFL 2002).

The above are powerful arguments for introducing a second language at the very start of a child's learning journey. The cognitive benefits of second language learning are a salient message to parents who seek rich educational experiences in order to give their children an edge in today's competitive education market.

The Australian Government has recognised the importance of second language learning and currently has a number of projects in place to forward the debate. AISV represents the independent sector on the Project Advisory Group for The Development of a Nationally Coordinated Promotion of the Benefits of Language Learning to Schools. The project, targeted at school principals, school leaders, students, parents and the community will include a Communication and Promotion strategy and the development of a range of promotional materials and products. The materials will highlight the intercultural, intellectual and vocational benefits of learning languages. They will reinforce positive attitudes to languages education and assist in culture change in schools and school communities where there are negative attitudes.

Aside from the obvious employment and travel benefits of knowing more than one language there is an important personal dimension that should not go unsaid. Knowing a second language and 'being intercultural' broadens our personal horizons. It gives us access to a deep understanding of others. It assists us to develop new perspectives and in doing so gives us cause to re-visit those we have already established. It enables us to understand Australia's diverse cultural makeup. As I write, the United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2008 International Year of Languages to promote unity in diversity and global understanding. Learning languages encourages us to look outside ourselves, beyond our borders towards the complex world, and in doing so helps us frame a personal and national identity that is mediated by knowledge and understanding. In short, learning a language has the potential to make better people of us all.

Learning a language in Australia should be seen like learning Maths or English, kicking a ball at recess time or eating lunch – it is a normal part of the curriculum in which every student should participate. It is a part of education for life (ACCSO 2007).

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